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VU VAN THAI

ON

U.S. AIMS AND INTERVENTION IN VIETNAM

Working Notes on Vietnam No. 4

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PREFACE

In the past two years I have spent many hours discussing Vietnam with Vu Van Thai. There is no one whom I have found more stimulating, and only a handful of individuals, mostly Vietnamese, whom I have found at all comparably experienced, perceptive and persuasive.

Going over my notepads of the last two years, I found that I had taken extensive notes on our many conversations, some at the time and others immediately afterward, mostly in outline form but generally preserving Thai's own wording and formulation. Each conversation touched on many subjects, and none, of course, was as structured as an interview; they were, indeed, dialogues, of which only one half has been transcribed. I have now sorted out and collected my notes on these conversations by general subject and sub-heading, fleshed them out slightly where I am confident of my memory, and indicated, in brackets, the question to which Thai's comments were addressed. (In many cases, he was actually responding to a comment by me, not transcribed, rather than to a direct question). I have also included, in brackets, a few comments by me, some of them from our conversation and others added when I wrote the notes. For the benefit particularly of those at RAND working on "Lessons of Vietnam" and related subjects, I am issuing these notes now in three documents:

D-19127-ARPA/AGILE - "Vu Van Thai On U.S. Aims and Intervention in Vietnam"

D-19128-ARPA/AGILE - "U.S. Support of Diem: Comments by Vu Van Thai"

D-19136-ARPA/AGILE - "Vu Van Thai On Pacification"

Readers who find these relevant to their work should also be interested in similar D's based on conversations with Hoang Van Chi (D-19134-ARPA/AGILE, "Communists and Vietnamese" and D-19135-ARPA/AGILE, "Confucians and Communists"), and in other D's by me that reflect, in particular, my talks with Thai and Chi (e.g., D-19863-ARPA/AGILE, "U.S. Aims and Leverage in Vietnam, 1950-65" and D-19129-ARPA/AGILE, "U.S. Policy and

the Politics of Others." They should also see Thai's RM-5997-ARPA, Fighting and Negotiating in Vietnam: A Strategy."

It is my hope that Thai himself, when he returns to this country from economic consultation work in Africa for the UN, will be moved by my Boswellian labor to use these notes as starting points for more elaborated pieces of his own on these subjects. (Until he has a chance to see them, they should not be shown outside RAND.)

For those readers unfamiliar with Thai's background: from 1950-54, Thai was a non-communist member of the Central Committee of France of the Lien Viet (earlier, and still more commonly known as the Viet Minh). After the Geneva negotiations of 1954 (which he attended), he joined the Diem government in Saigon and became Director of Budget and Foreign Aid until he submitted his resignation in October 1960 (not accepted till late in 1961, when he joined the United Nations). He has been a part-time consultant to The Rand Corporation since 1967, and is principally occupied at present as consultant to the Administrator of the UN Development Program.

VU VAN THAI  
ON  
U.S. AIMS AND INTERVENTION IN VIETNAM

APPROPRIATE AIMS IN VIETNAM

Diem's aim was to destroy communism in both North and South Vietnam; but he looked forward to eternal struggle, not eradication of communism. Meanwhile, he aimed totally and permanently to exclude communists from political life in South Vietnam. Nhu's approach was to build organizations on communist lines, hopefully as efficient, competing on communists' ground. Thai would have counselled rather: don't play by communist rules; design rules consistent with your own philosophy.

" 'Anti-communism' limits U.S. ability to influence the GVN to compete effectively with communism." The United States should oppose oppression, not communism: communist methods, not communist faith.

We must make our own aims and methods consistent with our philosophy, to avoid being worn out in a long struggle. The uniqueness of Vietnam lies only in terms of the long time-span of struggle. The first lesson for rebels to learn from Vietnam: "Put time on your side ... and survive." Like Ho Chi Minh ... [This is a lesson for a Rebel facing an opponent who is strong, or has strong external support, but is susceptible to "judo."]

Success in avoiding communist domination in Vietnam depends on:

1. crystallization of Vietnamese non-communist opinion;
2. developments in the Sino-Soviet rift;
3. maintaining credibility of U.S. reaction to NVA invasion.

"Crystallization" means: (a) one or more trends of public aspiration are articulated into a program; (b) emergence of leadership and organization, parallel to the program; (c) coalition in face of the communist threat, accommodation among themselves of non-communist groups.

The election campaign of 1967 was too short a period for the first two of these, and the gap between intellectuals and public was too large. Lengthy debate is needed, hence, a free press.

U.S. aims should now be:

(a) Progressive strengthening of non-communists, using the stimulus of open competition with the communists.

(b) If communists take over, it is by peaceful means over a long period: during which, practical accommodations are achieved between communists and non-communists (and communists are to some extent transformed during process).

Thai argues: Open competition with communists in the past would have been as likely to cause coalescence of non-communists, emergence of leadership, as collapse, demoralization; i.e., the chances of this were 50-50, even if the communists did use terror and military confrontation (as they would have). And this would still be the prospect.

[However, the Vietnamese communists are not merely dedicated, organized and efficient: but "modern," "national," "dynamic," "expansionist," ambitious, with missionary zeal. In all these aspects they contrast to the Hoa Hao, Catholics, Cao Dai, RD cadre, victims of Viet Cong, and northern refugees, who constitute the organized, or anti-communist supporters of the GVN.

[In the light of this, what of Frances Fitzgerald's judgement (shared by Paul Mus?): "Communists alone can attract and organize Buddhist peasants; the appeal of others is limited, and they are less efficient organizers"]? Thai disagrees. The Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Catholics, not only compete effectively but they can expand. Likewise the Buddhists (e.g., under Tri Quang); FULRO; labor; youth organization; and, e.g., Dr. Dan shows the possibility of urban political appeal. "These have not had a chance." They have been prevented by the French, Diem, the Generals, U.S. policy, and the war from an opportunity to exercise this potential.

If there is not and will not be any political development, then negotiations with communists relying upon the U.S. presence, can only

be about peaceful takeover by the communists, in a time period long enough for some accommodations to take place. Thus, this is the fall-back goal if political development just doesn't happen -- if the Vietnamese fail to get together, under competitive conditions -- or if it is not even undertaken.

If there is political development: then lengthen the negotiations, aim at a higher outcome (assuming a ceasefire is achieved, or the costs of the conflict are otherwise greatly reduced for the United States). The trouble with the pessimism of Stanley Hoffman, Robert F. Kennedy, Edmund Stillman, etc., toward non-communist cohesion: "Non-communist capabilities have not been tested, in a context of the aims of building a society of tolerance and diversity: rather than of 'control' by the GVN, or the extirpation of communists."

Some members of the United States Government seem to believe that the March and November 1968 decisions of the U.S. Government pushed the Government of Vietnam in a good direction (toward broadening the government, and thoughts of talks with the NLF); but that more moves in this direction -- e.g., larger troop reductions, ceasefire -- would be dangerous, demoralizing. Why? Did they foresee, prior to March 1968, the good effects that might follow from those decisions?

[The U.S. Government almost always prefers large-risk-later to small-risk-now, i.e., a small risk of major setback in the immediate future. In effect, it has a very high rate of time-discount of later costs and benefits. But, in Vietnam there was no way -- at various crucial times -- to avert large risks later without taking small risks in the short run. We chose to reduce short-run political risks to the minimum in 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958 -- holding the door closed on a "cheap" Viet Cong political takeover during that period -- but at the cost of providing good growing weather for a large and increasing Viet Cong military threat from 1959 on.]

[The chosen, short-run solution (repeated by the GVN, with U.S. concurrence, again and again) to the problem of preserving a fragile Government was to suppress all threats against it -- communist and

non-communist -- creating artificial hot-house, or sterile laboratory, conditions: an "opposition-free environment," ultimately to be "communist-free." But success in the short-run work of repressing all opposition not only guaranteed failure in the given long-run aim -- communist insurgency grew in this atmosphere -- but ensured that the GVN would be unable to function, without massive help, in face of this failure. And that meant, given our sense of the costs of allowing the GVN to fail, that we were likely to be heavily involved with combat forces.]

Following are some opportunities that were open to the United States to have increased the long-run chances of containing communism at low cost, or of "failing" at lower cost than we have incurred. These measures might have increased the strength, in the long-run, of non-Communist forces, though appearing to reduce or eliminate the chance (probably illusory anyway) of total exclusion or destruction of the Communists, and perhaps increasing the risks of communist advances or takeover in the short-run. (Some of these were compatible; others not.)

1. Stand on the Geneva Agreement: insist on negotiations dealing with elections, bilateral relations, and unification; and eventually, encourage elections.
2. Exert pressure on Diem -- accepting a risk of breaking relations and having to leave, or of antagonizing Diem, or causing GVN instability or non-cooperation -- for the GVN to:
  - (a) broaden base of government;
  - (b) tolerate communists as legal party (especially after 1956);
  - (c) accept economic exchange with North Vietnam;
  - (d) end arbitrary arrest; provide legal recourse to aggrieved;
  - (e) produce an economic development plan (Diem refused, as Thai puts it, the "discipline of a plan"), and tailor U.S. assistance to plan's fulfillment;
  - (f) develop a strong independent, impartial justice system (as in Malaya, Pakistan);

(g) allow freedom of expression.

[Thai regards "formal democracy" beyond these measures, as "not critical" ; but I would ask: without elements of "democracy" -- some sharing of power -- how do we get the other conditions? To some extent, U.S. pressure can substitute for an internal, open, active opposition; but not in a continuing, day-to-day detailed manner.]

3. Drop Diem earlier: e.g., after Diem's refusal to carry out promised broad reforms after the abortive Thi coup of November 1960.
4. Nurture Buddhist/student movements and ride that wave, with Big Minh, after November 1963.
5. Refuse to recognize Khanh coup. ("In fact," Thai believes, "the U.S. was relieved at the removal of a government too soft on communists, Buddhists, students, too lenient in the war.") Instead, back Minh Government, insist that it move toward broad-based constitutional regime (along with genuine reform of army and administration).
6. Leave Ky and Thieu fighting each other prior to 1967 election: thus encourage two civil-military states.
7. Encourage 1956-58 reconciliation of Hoa Hao, Cao Dai (accept risk that the country would fall apart), overriding Diem's reluctance to share power after 1955; encourage measures to win their active commitment to GVN.
8. Not oppose, or covertly encourage, individuals inclined to talk to or seek national deal with NLF, or steps toward this: e.g., alternatives to Diem, 1958-63; Nhu, 1963; Minh (?) 1963; Tri Quang Buddhists 1963-69(?); Au Truong Thanh, Dr. Dan, Tran Ngoc Chau...

None of this, perhaps, was really "possible" for the U.S. in the '50's or early '60's, given U.S. views of stakes and U.S. preconceptions. But as a lesson for the future...

INFEASIBLE AIMS IN VIETNAM

[Was it impossible totally to destroy the communist organization in Vietnam? If so, when and why did this come about?]

Yes, it was impossible. Increasingly definitive events marking this would be:

1. After the August 1945 Bao Dai surrender of authority to Ho and the Viet Minh, leaving the Viet Minh holding Hanoi.
- or 2. By December 1946, when destruction of other nationalist groups had been completed and fighting broke out -- bringing hostilities vs. French under communist banner.
- or 3. Late 1949: the coming of Chinese communists to the border of Vietnam. (At that point, the French fight becomes Sisyphean.)
4. After 1954: the Viet Minh apparatus in the South had a heritage of prestige from victory over the French, tested cadre, and existence of an international base (NVN) to provide training, know-how, finance, leadership.

After 1954, elements of survival in the South were definitive (unlike Malaya): abundance of food in the Delta, potential helpers all around (not just in the cities like the Chinese population in Malaya), border and cross-border sanctuaries, help from NVN, pool of regroupees, cadre almost uniquely well-guided and experienced in clandestine organization.

[Might good police have broken the communist organization?]

The GVN would have used a good police force, as it used the poor one, mainly to repress non-communist political opposition. Or else the police would have run the country. If the British had already been running the GVN, but had promised independence as in Malaya they could have created and used good police. But if the U.S. had taken over for this purpose or another, there would have been revolution. "Vietnamese are not xenophobic, but resent

foreign control:" Witness their friendly attitude toward French individuals after 1954. "In any case, even the British would not have had the success in Vietnam after 1954 that they had in Malaya."

French intelligence in Vietnam, 1930-1940, was very good: probably as good as British in Malaya. (The only restraint created by the French Popular Front was that when communist cadre were captured, they were not killed.) But the French intelligence apparatus was destroyed by the war, and Vietnamese cooperation with it was destroyed by Vietnamese expectations of independence.

Moreover, even the best Vietnamese government with the best police would do better to leave the Viet Cong an opportunity to compete by legal means: discredit their doctrine, oppose their methods; erode them through competition. This was especially true because after 1954 one could not destroy Viet Cong leadership by operations in South Vietnam. There would always persist a corps of well-trained, proven leaders to smuggle into South Vietnam from the DRV. So one couldn't "cut the head off the hydra" or prevent re-starting of insurgency.

Kill leaders in the South, and the DRV could still send new leaders: Le Duan, Le Duc Tho had great experience in the South, and could come themselves; or would know who to pick, how to train them. (Thus, no single coup was possible like the capture of much of the Huk Central Committee in Manila, even before the onset of the Magsaysay Reforms.)

Communist -- not "DRV" -- use of the cadres left in South Vietnam and regroupees was inevitable, by nature of communists, if opportunities were created, pressures for action arose, by Diemists' arrests. DRV need for food from SVN -- or else heavy reliance on Chinese -- would ultimately have provided a strong motive.

#### U.S. POLITICAL TACTICS, AND FEASIBLE AIMS

U.S./GVN policies were so far from optimal that it is hard to learn useful lessons; most promising ideas were never tried. "Almost nothing I proposed has ever been tried." So one has reason and temptation to hope: "If only..." One is distracted from facing the possibility

that the given aims were unattainable, "hopeless," even given better strategies.

Yet, in Thai's opinion, even though the elimination of communist influence was unattainable, total communist takeover was not inevitable, not even now. We can perhaps achieve, even now, as much as we could have in 1959 or later, though no more; this would now depend on the presence of U.S. troops, in contrast to earlier. However, we could not achieve now, or since 1959, even with U.S. troops, as much as could have been achieved in 1956 without U.S. troops; i.e., we could attain Thai's "minimum" outcome (see below). (Thai's "maximum," i.e., a permanent communist minority role, is improbable unless the United States continues the war for years, and pursues good policies.)

The role of the mass of the population is critical, either to suppress a five percent opposition or to contain or transform a twenty percent opposition (which probably cannot be wholly suppressed). In particular, the thirty-fifty percent of the population that are "switchable" in support are critical. But a government can't "win" these masses in a positive sense, it can only permit them to coalesce, crystallize, generate leaders.

We backed a faction -- (in Thai's eyes, "the worst: the neo-colonialists") that repelled coalescence, when a coalition was essential to deter or contain a communist uprising in South Vietnam, which was likely to be able to count on twenty percent support.

Indeed, we have always in Vietnam backed one unpopular, authoritarian, minority faction against another:

|                    |     |           |
|--------------------|-----|-----------|
| French and Bao Dai | vs. | Viet Minh |
| Diem               | vs. | Viet Cong |
| Generals           | vs. | Viet Cong |

with "our" faction always unwilling or unable to draw support from the mass "in between." [The result, in Tonkin, was defeat, and in South Vietnam, stalemate so long as the United States remains willing to provide massive support in the South.]

One form of U.S. government reasoning that may underly our unpromising political policy is:

- (a) it is impossible to draw mass active support, because the masses are inert, apathetic, apolitical; but
- (b) enough passive, and some active support would accrue to an apparent "winner," "protector," (or "generous government"); and meanwhile, there is no political way to reduce support to the Viet Cong, which is primarily coerced.

[What if an "optimal policy" had been followed; what would the odds have been, nevertheless, on communist dominance, as of the 1950's?] "50-50: not changing much over time." "The promise, or political 'capital' of a 'Third Force' approach has never been worn out, by a big trial." The costs of avoiding communist dominance have changed, not the odds given a sound policy, which remain about the same today: 50-50."

The confrontation with the Viet Cong should have been designed to strengthen the non-communist forces, and to expose communist contradictions; i.e., the outcome should reflect change in both, to the benefit of the non-communist side.

[But does Thai overestimate the probability that the communists, if "squeezed," would become "tolerant" and peaceful; or that a violent response by them would fail? Was there any chance of the former? Likewise for Diem, even early, if squeezed by negotiations with the DRV and U.S. pressure?]

It was almost certain that the communists would eventually, if denied a victory, resort to violence (likewise for the future, after a ceasefire); but with the right political strategy, they would not be certain of enough support for success; even without U.S. troops (but without the NVA). The odds cited, 50-50, reflect this.

As for the general stakes for the United States: "The Domino theory was always wrong in regarding the outcome in Vietnam as determining events in SEA (before or after '54). There was always a prospect of continuing confrontation with communists; success in Vietnam would not stop communist pressure elsewhere. Either might affect results, but other (especially internal) factors were far more important."

It was essential to ask, how much is it worth, to achieve a given outcome in Vietnam? [A failure to calculate can lead not only to an imprudent but to an immoral disproportion of means to ends.] Merely postponing Viet Cong takeover was less significant than the costs of demonstrating U.S. impotence. [Contrary to the attitude: "The one essential thing is to prevent a Viet Cong victory."]

After 1961, to have lost to the communists in a military defeat would have been increasingly damaging to U.S. prestige. "Thus, the U.S. had to enter in 1965. Southeast Asia would have been lost not only to the U.S. but even to the Soviets. We had to demonstrate U.S. will, show we were not a 'paper tiger.'" [But: which is worse? To have RVNAF and advisors defeated in 1965, or to have the U.S. stalemated at high investments for four years?]

"However, the only feasible military objective for the U.S. in 1965 was to achieve a stalemate: avert military defeat. This could be done with 100,000 troops. Any achievement beyond that depended on political tactics and achievement (including improvement of RVNAF)."

A minimally acceptable outcome (14 June 1968) would be a dominant communist role in an alliance of forces that in turn is a majority bloc in a coalition government. It would be worse for communists themselves to have a majority role directly. One should rather allow them greater influence indirectly than allow the direct influence: this in the interest of changing them, inducing them to practice open politics, alliance.

This may be about as much as we could realistically -- with likely policies and implementation -- have gotten earlier; i.e., after 1959 or so. (Starting in 1955 with optimal policies could have led to better results.)

There have been, over time, two trends, sometimes divergent and sometimes not, affecting possible settlements: (a) splits in the communist world; and (b) U.S. bargaining position.

In 1961, we could have aimed at settling the conflict on the basis of South Vietnamese trade with North Vietnam and acceptance of the NLF as an open part in South Vietnam. Yet a settlement then might not have been as favorable, in its final outcome, as now.

PREFERENCES AMONG BAD OUTCOMES, IN DECREASING ORDER OF BADNESS:

1. United States vs. Chinese communist (Soviet) battle in Vietnam (e.g., following U.S. invasion of North Vietnam), destroying the country.

2. Quick and total communist victory in Vietnam followed by war in Thailand, followed by U.S. aerial destruction of Vietnam.

3. Long war (2-4 years more) in Vietnam at current (1968) level (likely to lead to 1 or 2 above).

4. Communist government in South Vietnam dominated by China:

5. Communist government in South Vietnam dominated by Soviet.

} followed by peace.  
(Thai thinks this  
"unrealistic";  
2 is more likely.)

These are all, in Thai's opinion, so much worse than any other of the foreseeable outcomes that even the worst of the latter -- e.g., (in order of increasing preference) gradual domination, achieved by largely peaceful means, by communists controlled by Hanoi, or by relatively autonomous Southern communists, or by a coalition in turn dominated by communists -- look "good" by comparison.

ON U.S. INTERVENTION POLICY

In 1960-1961 it was too late to reform Diem. We should have started then to apply lessons in Thailand; to limit our commitment in South Vietnam; be tough on reforms; accept a risk, not only of losing Diem but losing South Vietnam. 1956-1958 was a good time either to use leverage on Diem or replace him. In late 1963, the United States should have gone all-out in support of Minh, on basis of "revolutionary spirit." The lesson to be applied elsewhere, e.g., Thailand, was: Have a plan and goals -- including a political plan and goals -- and both maximize and use leverage to achieve them; don't give in to blackmail by a weak ally.

The United States must have a long-run policy and must be willing to take risks of causing chaos and loss in a given area by exerting pressure, in order to increase leverage elsewhere.

[But leverage for what? Welfare? Anti-communism? Anti-inflation? Growth? Political development? Military buildup? Improvement in leverage is not enough: we need better understanding, clearer and more appropriate goals, policy.]

The aim of such leverage, in Vietnam, Thailand, or elsewhere should be to achieve a self-sustained process of economic, social and political development, well-articulated together, which will increase capital formation and government resources as aid is provided to accelerate growth.

We should encourage the rise of young experts by setting standards of performance for the administration that will compel the government not only to rely on young professionals, but even more important, to frame a program. The United States should be willing to take a risk, in pressing for the aim above, of refusal by the government to accept our aid, or of a coup. Meanwhile, this U.S. policy would strengthen position of those internal to the government who believe in such policies.

As an American, Thai would have adopted measures to stimulate GVN performance, rather than just to keep it afloat: accepting a risk

of loss. [Rather, we tend to accept large risks of heavy involvement over the longer run rather than take a risk (large or small, long-term or -- especially -- short-run) of loss to communism. The terms of exchange may be very steep; to cut the short-term risk of loss by a small degree, we may greatly increase the likelihood of facing a later choice between a near-certainty of bigger loss or acceptance of heavy involvement. Like an "over-protective" parent, gardener, animal-trainer: if one doesn't accept risks when the child/plant/animal is young -- letting the environment and the organism provide energy and stimuli for learning to survive -- then later, one must either provide a benevolent, artificial environment for the whole adult life, either of these at high and continuing cost, or intervene frequently oneself to counteract a hostile environment, or accept its death. The question should have been asked: What policies make High Cost Involvement probably necessary, and hence likely? We should consider this as well as the likelihood of communist pressures and successes.]

Our process, announced aims and criteria, and our intermediate goals of intervention are all to be criticized: not just our decisions to intervene.

Thai thinks that lack of knowledge and cultural differences are not (as Stillman suggests, in Kahn's "Can We Win in Vietnam?") the critical problem with U.S. patterns of intervention in Asia: but our general attitude, aims. We must analyze our own attitudes and inhibitions; needed changes in orientation are more abstract and general (e.g., "anti-communism is not enough, to merit our support") than specific to a national culture.

[On the other hand, I would conjecture that Thai could operate efficiently in other cultures; but not many Americans. The problem is not the fact of large difference in cultures, but some specific, peculiarly American cultural preconceptions: which, among other things, constrain learning, and effective influence.]

Thai observes that in UN technical programs, it is possible to discriminate those non-Americans that are more or less effective

at influence. Thus, Indians, Chinese communists, Japanese are rigid and ineffective "like Americans and Russians." But the Chinese Nationalists are flexible and effective; Israelis are good, but, like the United States, export their own ways; British are very good; French are fairly good, though hampered by a complex of superiority.